

A Long Way Gone

Study/Journal Questions

Introduction and Instructions:

This assignment will help you with your reading and reflection on *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah. You will respond to questions about the reading and to questions that lead you to think more broadly about the themes of the reading. Please note that you must finish the whole book before answering the following questions.

You will need to discuss each question thoroughly, using examples from the text (both directly quoted and referred to) to support your answers. You may bring in your own personal experiences, connections, and reactions to the text. We're interested in your own perspective, defended with examples from the text.

All of your answers must be in complete sentences. Your assignment should be typed, double-spaced, in 12-point Times or Times New Roman. Each answer should be about a page long. You should bring your completed assignment to campus with you on the first day of Connections; you should not expect to be able to print it on campus, even with your own equipment!

You must choose five of the ten questions and write responses. The assignment must be five pages total.

1. Beah stated that, "The only times that I found peace with myself was when I began writing song lyrics about the good times before the war. Through these writings, as well as the help of the staff in my psycho-social therapy home, I was able to successfully overcome my trauma. I once again rediscovered my childhood that was almost lost." Beah began working on his book in a college creative writing class. In what ways can writing be helpful in understanding problems and working through them? Why is writing such an effective tool in healing and gaining understanding? In what situations has personal writing benefited you?

2. Beah once commented, "I think that every human being should be aware of the possibility of change. . . . Everyone can make a difference. You don't have to be rich or famous to do so. If one person can change the way they interact with other people, no matter who they are or where they are from, that makes a big difference. It seems to me, one of the main problems of our last century was the inability of individuals to get along with each other." Do you agree with Beah? Why or why not? Beah was rescued because of people who have dedicated their lives to helping those in need. As a college freshman, what is your responsibility to help those less fortunate than you? Do you think the actions of one person can make a significant difference in solving conflicts between people or nations? Identify some of the people or groups of people you might encounter on campus or in Logan who might be in need of your assistance, and explain how you might offer help.

3. Some have questioned the accuracy of *A Long Way Gone*, asserting that the detailed descriptions of past events would be beyond what an adult could remember about life as a twelve-year-old. Although there is no question that Beah's horrific experience happened, we may not be sure that all the detail is accurate. Should we regard memoir as truth? How much can we

trust what we read? How should you as a college student approach the information you encounter in readings and lectures? What does critical thinking require of you as a college student?

4. *A Long Way Gone* describes the human toll of war, the suffering of innocents and man's inhumanity to man. How did the book change your perceptions of war? What is the human toll of the wars our country is presently involved in? If you were forced to fight in those conflicts against your will and take human lives, what do you perceive your reaction would be? How might your future be affected?

5. Many of the shared narratives of society (both fiction and non-fiction) are epic in nature: *The Lord of the Rings*, George Washington crossing the Delaware, the bombing of the Twin Towers. Beah's story is in many ways just as unimaginable as these kind of stories. Yet the best stories also have a way of connecting to individuals in their everyday lives. In what ways did Beah's harrowing tale connect with you in your everyday life? How does reading a story like Beah's make the challenges you face more manageable? What actions or personality traits do you find in his story that you would attribute to his ability to overcome the challenges he faced? How might you develop similar traits or skills to help you through difficult times you face?

6. In the short "New York City, 1998" prologue that begins the memoir, Ishmael's friend find some things about his past to be "cool." If they had read this book, do you think they would still feel that way? Why or why not? How much does what has happened in our pasts affect the here and now? What are you bringing with you to college? What will you leave behind? Based on Ishmael's experience, what is our capacity to make changes in who we are and what direction we will take?

7. What kinds of music does Ishmael like, and why? What is it about music that matters to Ishmael, or that moves him so? Why is it so important to him, especially during his rehabilitation at Benin Home? What music do you rely on during times of difficulty? Why is it meaningful to you?

8. Beah's harrowing account of civil war and childhood can also be seen as a meditation on finding one's ultimate purpose. How does Ishmael, at a relatively early age, arrive at what seems to be his calling in life? How will you go about deciding your "calling" in life? What factors will influence your decision? How will you know when you have found that "calling"?

9. How are the issues raised in *A Long Way Gone* relevant to a high school or college student living in Utah? Sierra Leone is 6,000 miles from Utah, across the Atlantic Ocean, with unique political, social, and economic problems. How do wars in Africa or other places in the world affect you? What have you learned from reading *A Long Way Gone* that will make a difference in the way you view the world?

10. Because of the unpredictable nature of Beah's experiences, he was compelled to adjust his expectations on a regular basis. Review some of these instances and identify the coping mechanisms Beah developed. How might these tools be useful as you begin your academic career at USU?